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Salvadoran Rebels, Resisting Army Drive, Are Said to Kill Civilians

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SAN SALVADOR, Feb. 1 — Salvadoran leftist rebels, apparently in a determined effort to assert their power, have shot several civilians in the last two months, according to diplomatic, military and human rights officials.

A three-day trip to the most fought-over areas of the countryside and interviews with peasants and army officers there indicated that the killings are part of an increasingly bitter contest between the army and rebels for control of the peasant population and the highways.

For the first time in the seven-year-old conflict refugees appear to be trying to return to the countryside in significant numbers. The army is spending more time in areas once controlled by the rebels, whose popularity seems to be waning.

Both the rebels and the army now appear determined to exert control over the people they encounter. Two army officers conceded that the army was creating a network of informers. The rebels appear to have responded with a heavy hand, firing on highway traffic during declared bans on transport and killing people suspected of being spies.

Six Peasants Are Shot

At times the rebels give warnings to such suspects and hold brief trials before carrying out executions, according to human rights officials.

In the worst recent case, a guerrilla unit summarily shot six peasant coffee-pickers near the abandoned hamlet of Los Laureles in San Vicente Department without any effort to hold a trial or give a warning, according to several peasants who say they saw the rebels detain the victims.

The rebel radio has denied that the guerrillas carried out the shootings. But peasants who say they witnessed the rebels tying up the victims said in interviews that they recognized the killers as members of a rebel unit that they have seen for several years in the area.

The killings appear to be among the most severe human rights violations by the guerrillas in the war. The victims included three women, all of whom had been raped, according to María Inés Alvarado and her daughter María, two survivors who say they prepared the bodies for burial.

One of those shot, 19-year-old Rosa Henríquez, was six months pregnant, according to Mrs. and Miss Alvarado. Those killed were parents to at least 11 young children, the survivors said. Mrs. Alvarado's other daughter, Margarita, was among those killed. Mrs. Alvarado said she found the bodies dumped in a gulch on San Vicente volcano.

Husband Seized by Rebels

"Nobody imagined they would do such things as we saw," said María Alvarado, whose common-law husband, Arnoldo, was among those taken away. His body has not been found.

"He was the one who tied him up and told the guerrillas to ask me if he had ever been with the army," she said. "He never had been with the army."

None of those killed spied for the army, the survivors contended. In the past the rebels seldom carried out such shootings without explanation; nor are they known to have raped women.

In December there were reliable reports of 14 killings of unarmed civilians by the rebels, according to diplomats and human rights officials. Most of those killed were accused of being spies or were shot while traveling on highways during a national ban on traffic decreed by the rebels.

Human rights officials, diplomats and military officers also cite a string of rebel executions in December of peasants accused of being spies in the villages of Nuevo Edén de San Juan and San Gerardo in San Miguel Department, the operating zone of the rebel Popular Revolutionary Army.

In addition, the rebels have kidnapped at least one mayor, Salomón Sánchez, from the village of Osicala in Morazán Department. A church official said the rebels also executed a woman in the refugee settlement of

San José las Flores in Chalatenango Department last month, accusing her of being an informer.

Such killings appear at times to be prompted by the rebels' fear that the army is asserting control and infiltrating informers into areas where the rebels operate.

The rebels may have reason to hold such fears. A Salvadoran Army intelligence official who works with the Arce battalion in the heavily contested areas of eastern San Miguel and Morazán Departments said the battalion, which has one of the worst human rights records in the army, has begun a psychological operations campaign. The effort has

been backed by the Central Intelligence Agency, according to two sources aware of the operation.

Under the program, the battalion detains peasants in areas where the guerrillas operate. According to the intelligence official, some of the peasants are suspected of being supporters of the guerrillas; others are believed to be neutral.

The peasants are shown videotapes depicting the guerrillas as terrorists and the army as a vastly superior force that cannot be defeated, the official said. The peasants are then taken back to their villages, with the expectation

that they will be more sympathetic to the army.

The official said that in December the Arce battalion detained 85 peasants in northern San Miguel Department. Of those, 13 were imprisoned as guerrillas. The others were allowed to go home, the official said. He refused to say if any of the peasants were or had been army spies.

The rebels' response was almost immediate, the official said. They executed three of the returnees as spies and the army expects they may execute others, he contended, an account that could not be independently confirmed.